Wild Strawberries: Receptivity and Reconciliation vs. Arrogance and Rigidity

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We meet the 78-year-old Isak Borg in his study in Stockholm, where he tells us about his life. Borg had been a family doctor who later earned his doctorate in bacteriology and became a prominent scientist. He married Karin and fathered a son named Evald who also became a medical doctor and married Marianne. Since the death of his wife, Isak Borg has remained a widower. He describes himself as a pedant. Although he is something of a loner, he still has his faithful housekeeper Agda to keep him company. Today, 50 years after he earned his doctorate from Lund University, he is going to receive the honorary title of Doctor Jubilaris.

After the opening credits, we are plunged into Borg’s first surrealist dream.

Walking through the streets of a deserted city, Isak Borg sees a clock without hands. He checks his pocket watch, but like the clock on the street it shows no time. The only sound we hear is his heartbeat. Borg sees a man and approaches him, only to discover that his face is pinched grotesquely. The stranger falls down and dies. A horse-drawn hearse slowly rounds the corner and runs into a lamp post. A coffin falls
out of the carriage and a hand sticks out. But it is not a corpse inside; the hand tries to pull Borg into the coffin.

He wakes up, gasping and sweating. It is early still and he decides to drive to Lund. It is going to be a long day for him, a trip down memory lane with more dreams and confrontations along the way.

The first confrontation takes place in the car, with Marianne. His daughter-in-law has spent the night at his house and Borg is giving her a lift home. She complains that her father-in-law is distant and shows no interest in other people’s lives. Marianne’s husband Evald agrees, she says.

You are a selfish old man

Surprised, Borg falls silent. On the way they stop at the house where Borg’s family used to spend their summers. While Marianne takes a swim, he goes to his favorite spot, a field of wild strawberries, where he sinks into a reverie.

The sweetheart of Borg’s youth, Sara, is picking strawberries when suddenly Borg’s brother Sigfrid shows up and makes advances at her. Sara half-heartedly resists. Later, when the whole family gets together for lunch, young Isak is absent. He has gone fishing with his father, as he always loved to do. But the elderly Borg is still walking around at the summer cottage, invisible to all. He overhears Sara, who is telling her cousin that Isak is too good for her, with his poetry, his high morals and only wanting to kiss in the dark. And that she finds Sigfrid so exciting.

Borg is woken from his daydream by a girl looking to hitch a ride down south. Her name is Sara and she is the spitting image of young Isak’s sweetheart. But this Sara is hitchhiking with two students: Viktor, a medical student and Anders, who is majoring in theology. They climb in and the whole group continues their trip in high spirits.

Borg sees a car approaching on his side of the road. Both cars swerve to avert a collision and the other vehicle flips over. The couple in it are unscathed, but their car is no longer drivable. They too, have to come along in Borg’s car. It soon becomes clear that the couple have an embittered relationship, and it affects everyone’s mood. Marianne, who took over the driving after the near-accident, stops the car and asks them to get out. Isak sighs.

It reminds me of my own marriage

By now they are driving through the region where Borg used to have his doctor’s practice. When they stop for fuel, the owner of the gas station recognizes him and is full of praise. Speaking on behalf of “everyone around here,” he says: “They’ll never forget your kindness.” Under his breath, Borg replies:
Maybe I should have stayed here ...

The five travelers stop for a relaxing lunch in the sun. Borg talks, the students argue amongst themselves, and the wine flows. Then Borg recites poetry:

Where is the friend I seek where'er I'm going?

Marianne and Borg decide to stop by to see Borg’s aging mother who lives in the area. She is 96, suspicious and distant, and complains she’s been cold all her life. In the end she gives her son a family heirloom: a gold pocket watch without hands… The journey continues and Borg, in the passenger seat, dozes off to sleep.

This time, old Borg speaks directly with young Sara. She holds a mirror up to him, literally and figuratively. “No, don’t look away, even as a child you couldn’t bear the truth.” And: “you know so much, yet you know nothing.” Sara tells him she is going to marry Sigfrid. This hurts Borg.

Later, he approaches a house and tries to enter a closed door. When he raps on it loudly, a man approaches from inside and opens it.

Please come in, Professor Borg

He enters a lecture hall, where he is asked to take an exam. Looking through a microscope, he only sees his own eye; he cannot remember what a doctor’s first duty is (‘asking for forgiveness’ or taking care of your neighbors); and his diagnosis of a patient turns out to be totally wrong (he pronounces her dead, but is proven wrong). This man who is celebrating his 50 year anniversary as a doctor is failing on all counts. And that is not all.

You are charged with the crime of being guilty…..and of callousness, selfishness and ruthlessness.

The prosecutor is his wife, Karin, who died thirty years earlier. She committed adultery in the woods, knowing that he would not care at all. “He’ll probably say: there’s nothing to forgive. Such hypocrisy!” She never knew that Borg had seen the whole scene and could recall every last detail of the tryst in his mind. Is there a punishment for his
Your punishment is loneliness.

Borg wakes up. The car has stopped. Only Marianne is with him now. He tells her about his dream. “It’s like being dead while I’m alive.” This surprises his daughter-in-law. “Right, that’s what Evald says too. I’m pregnant, but Evald thinks it’s irresponsible to bring a child into the world. He says: ‘I was an unwanted child in an unhappy marriage … I loathe this life.’ What’s with this death wish in your family? I want to keep this baby…” Borg turns to her suddenly, and for the first time he asks:

Can I help you?

The students return and offer him a bunch of flowers they have picked. “For the wise old man who knows everything about life now that he has been a doctor for 50 years.” The students fade from view and only Isak Borg remains visible, sitting in the car with mixed feelings.

They arrive at Evald and Marianne’s house, where the elder Borg will spend the night. The ceremony to honor Isak Borg is brief but meaningful. He is tired and decides not to go to the gala ball afterwards. When he is in bed for the night, he asks Evald to join him for a chat. The father asks his son about his marriage to Marianne. Their talk is interrupted when Marianne comes in, dressed in her ball gown. She kisses her father-in-law on the cheek and he says:

I like you a lot, Marianne...

It has been a long day for him and he nods off.

Young Sara takes old Isak Borg along to find his parents. Standing on a hill, he sees them on the other side of the water, his father fishing and his mother reading a book in the sunlight. They wave to him. He relives the happiness and safety of his childhood.

And this reserved, old man thaws on the threshold of death.

Wild strawberries represent a place that seems insignificant yet has great sentimental value. It represents homesickness: the favorite place of your youth. And it is an emotional anchor, just as it is for Isak Borg in this end of life movie. Apart from celebrating his successes, he acknowledges his mistakes and shortcomings. You can only arrive at a balanced evaluation of life if you engage periodically in moments of contemplation and confrontation. Have you truly lived? Have you truly loved? Have you been truly just? In order to close life off with a sense of harmony, you need to reconcile yourself with old tensions and pains.
Smultronstället, 1957, 93 minutes, Sweden

Screenplay and direction: Ingmar Bergman
Actors: Victor Sjostrom (Professor Isak Borg), Ingrid Thulin (Marianne Borg), Gunnar Bjonstrand (Evald Borg), Bibi Andersson (Sara then and Sara now).

Virtues and Values
Intrinsic values: receptiveness, sincerity, responsibility, reconciliation.
Instrumental values: self-reflection, feedback, learning ability (Virtues); selfishness, stubbornness, arrogance and rigidity (Vices).

Relevant Connections
The use of dream sequences in film as a surrealist mode of narrative expression are invariably linked to Salvador Dali. The surrealists Dali and Luis Bunuel filmed Un Chien Andalou (1929), a short movie which reenacted the dreams each man had had over the past few days. The film also contains an infamous scene of a razor blade cutting through an eye. It did not go unnoticed. In 1945, Alfred Hitchcock incorporated a Dali dream sequence in Spellbound. Dali originally produced several scenes that added up to 19 minutes of celluloid, but producer David Selznick insisted it be edited down. What is left over is pure surrealism: a dream in which we see eyes cut by scissors, a casino, a woman who goes around kissing everyone, a card player accused of cheating, a falling man, someone on a roof holding a typically misshapen Dali-esque wheel and then being chased by a big, swooping bird. Ultimately, the dream sequence in Spellbound was cut back to under two minutes. Our own dreams may not always be as fantastic as this, but they do bear resemblances to it. Our own dreams, too, have fixed, archetypal themes; there is the falling dream, the flying...
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dream, the erotic dream, the shame dream and the exam dream (which Isak Borg experienced too).

In *Wild Strawberries*, we see elements of the literary convention of a journey through, and a confrontation with, the past. In Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1320) this quest takes place in the afterlife, during Easter week in the Christian Jubilee Year of 1300 (each fiftieth year is a Holy Jubilee Year). During his travels, Dante is guided first by his favorite poet Virgil and later by his childhood love Beatrice. Like Sara in the Bergman film, Beatrice is a girl the protagonist fell in love with in his youth and stayed in love with the rest of his life.

The poetry Isak Borg quotes during the outdoor lunch scene is by Johan Olof Wallin (1779-1839): Where is the friend I seek where’er I’m going? Wallin, a household name in Sweden, is know for his poems about death and loss. Thematically, there are echoes of August Strindberg’s officer who, after his promotion, goes back to his elementary school days in *A Dream Play* (1901). There are also reminders of the gentleman who, after losing his family, chooses to live in ‘splendid isolation’ with a loyal housekeeper at his side in *The Storm* (1907). And we see similarities to Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (1843), inasmuch as the film is about entering the world of others as an invisible observer. In *A Christmas Carol*, the ghost of Christmas past takes Scrooge back and shows him how he behaved in the past (the way Sara holds a mirror up to Borg). Then the ghost of Christmas present shows him the here and now (like Marianne in *Wild Strawberries*), and it is only afterwards that he reconciles himself to the way he has lived. Retaining the willingness to learn into old age is something few achieve. Perhaps it is even harder for those who think they’re clever, wiser than the rest. For those who overestimate themselves. More about that in next month’s blog.

(Translation: Word’s Worth)