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The Powerless Witness: A Bystander's Account of Elsie's Murder in Fritz Lang's *M*

Elizabeth Chapa

Fritz Lang's 1931 film *M* opens with a mother waiting for her young child, Elsie, to return home from school. It is evident by the costuming that the mother is of the lower class. Unlike the other children, whose parents wait in fur coats at the school to accompany them home, Elsie is not fortunate enough to have an escort and must walk the streets alone. As we see Elsie leave school bouncing her ball down the street, she is approached by a man, who is only introduced by way of his shadow. The mysterious man purchases Elsie a balloon and various other gifts, gradually gaining her trust--the first of which is a balloon in the shape of the child. This balloon accompanies Elsie and the man, Beckert, as he lures her away from the city. The following narration is from the balloon's perspective.

Snap.

A knot is tied near my legs and I can feel the excess rope trail beneath me as if to form some sort of tail. I feel the grip around the rope release and I begin to drift upwards.

Bwhump. Bwhump, Bwhump.

Knocking into a few people on the way up, I jostle around until I rest comfortably in the middle of the clump. The whole clump gets tossed sideways as our owner pulls us along. I feel a slight shove downwards and the clump gets squished a little as we're brought into a new atmosphere. Instantly, I feel fresh air surround me. Our clump suddenly stops and we right ourselves. Our tails are then tied together on a post. I feel the warmth from the midday sun as I drift aimlessly, or at least as far as I'm able to, remaining tethered to the stand. The cool breeze tugs us this way and that, causing our little clump to sway along with the music of the wind. Or is that actual music?

Off in the distance, I hear a faint whistle that slowly grows louder and louder. As it draws closer, the whistle is accompanied by the pitter patter of footsteps.

Then, a sharp smell hits me. It's a strong scent of pine needles and sap, wafting up, up, up as if to suggest I'm sitting taller than the trees. There's something suspicious about it, but I can't quite place it. The smell stops directly beneath me.

So does the whistling.

Jangle jangle.

Coins are exchanged below, and careful hands reach in and grab hold of my rope. I feel a slight tug at the end of my tail. Slowly, I'm untangled from my place in the clump and gently directed towards another set of hands.

"Pretty!"

It's a child's voice, so full of eagerness and excitement. My tail is quickly grasped in her small hands. I can feel the weight of her eyes admiring my figure before speaking again.

"Thank you!"

Directly following this, I can sense her moving closer to the whistling man, however I trail behind as much as my tail will allow. Next to him or not, his smell is pungent as ever. The pine stench seeps into my skin and screams at me.

DANGER! DANGER!

If only there was a way for me to warn the little girl. She shouldn't trust this man.

His whistling persists as the breeze picks up, allowing me to trail even further behind the pair. I catch myself on a tree branch, hoping the girl connected will also be forced to stop. My guess turns out to be correct.

"My balloon!"

The girl remains helpless beneath the tree, refusing to move on without me, her most treasured possession for the time being. Much to my dismay, the whistling man steps back and unshackles me with ease, making my attempt of a rescue no more than a failed effort.

We continue on our journey, and with each step, I grow more and more weary of the whistling man. At one point, the penetrating pine odor is overtaken by a sweeter smell; I'm engulfed by the sugary aroma of chocolate and confectionery sweets.

Ding-a-ling-a-ling

The man opens the door to the candy store and allows the child to walk in, with me exceptionally close behind her.

"Ooh! Can I have some of that?"

The little girl jumps up and down with excitement, causing a jolting sensation in me too.

Jangle, jangle.

There's another exchange of coins, and I hear the crinkling of candy wrappers, as well as the crumpling noise of the paper bag they're put in.

Overriding all these sounds, though, is the whistling tune that never finds an end.

The man swiftly guides us out and onto our next destination as if in a hurry. What is on this man's agenda? I'm almost certain it's something evil, but what can I do? I'm forced to be a passive bystander, unable to speak, yet doomed to perceive. I can't guide this child away, or yell at her to run. In the end, I won't even be able to see what he ends up doing to the girl.

Although, maybe that's for the best.

Our next destination is accompanied by a whole myriad of sounds.

Clink, clank. Clink, clank.

I hear whirs and beeps and that incessant whistling. The girl leads me all throughout the toy shop before selecting her choice of toy and bringing it to the man.

"Could I have this one, please?"

Jangle, jangle.

A coin exchange happens for a third time, and something tells me this is our last detour before this little girl's final destination.

The girl, laden with goodies, willingly follows the man out and I realize something peculiar. During this whole journey, this man has not spoken. The only noise he emits is the continuation of his tune. He doesn't ask the girl questions about her life, nor does he bond with her. He's systematically going through a checklist of actions as if they're a chore. All this man does is merely whistle while he works.

I begin to hear the crackle of crisp leaves underfoot and the snapping of branches as we pass through to what I can only conclude to be a secluded area of underbrush. I make one last attempt to catch myself on some sort of shrubbery, though I find no success.

Oh little girl, don't you know how much danger you're in? It's not too late! Drop your goodies and run! Although I know she's too trusting of this man to do so, I keep holding onto hope that she will come to her senses.

Shink.

That sound alerts me that the time for escape has passed. The smell of pine gets even stronger.

"What's that?"

The little girl asks, not with concern, but with innocent curiosity. She receives nothing but his whistling in response.

"Excuse me sir, I asked you a-"

Her words are interrupted by a gasp. The whistling stops. The woods are silent. The only noise I hear is the slight rustling of the leaves as they're gently tickled by the wind.

Thud.

I'm jerked downward as the little girl is tackled to the ground. Her candy scatters around the forest floor, and her toys topple away. She begins to cry

for help, but her screams are replaced with a gagging noise as the whistling man chokes her. Before she's completely asphyxiated, he releases her. Her vocal cords are beyond repair; her cries are no more than hoarse exhales. Her grip gets tighter around my tail as she holds onto the only happiness she has left. My body floats side to side, parallel to her struggling attempts to escape. Oh little girl, this is only the beginning of the end. You're too late. There's nothing anybody can do now.

Squelch.

I hear the puncture of skin and a tang of iron fills the air, mixing with the pine needle cologne of the whistling man. I hear the gush of liquid as the little girl's blood begins to flow out of her. Her attempts to scream come more frequently, but they're never successful.

Squelch.

There is another puncture. The iron-y essence intensifies, and a second gush begins. Her flailing begins to slow. I can feel the little girl's grip loosening around my rope. Her strength is escaping as the life is drawn out of her.

Squelch, squelch.

The punctures become more frequent. The pine smell is now completely beat out by the stench of raw, fresh blood. I'm thankful if only for the fact that I can't see this horrifying event; the sounds and smells are bad enough.

Unable to mask his pleasure any longer, the man makes his first noise apart from his whistling.

Squelch, squelch, squelch, squelch.

A bubble of laughter (or is that some other sound of release?) erupts from him and he brings the knife down again and again.

At long last, the prolonged death of the little girl comes to a close. The girl's struggles have ceased. She lays motionless on the grass. The last of her strength has escaped her, and with it, I'm released into the air.

Up, up, up I go. The sole witness to the town's worst offender. Yet all I can do is float away, preaching a silent alarm that no one will think anything of. Even if I could alert the cityfolk, what good would it do, anyway? She's already gone.

The last thing I hear before I drift off into oblivion is the man whistling once more. He finally brings his tune to an end, just as he did the little girl.