

THINGS THAT GO WRONG

A d20 of night complications

Roll a d20 when a night scene runs too smoothly. Each complication costs time, light, or certainty without stopping the story. Turn the screw when the table is comfortable — or when someone says it can't get worse.

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1

The light dies. The lantern gutters, the torch drowns, the lamp-oil is water. Ten heartbeats of true dark before anyone finds flint.

TURN THE SCREW When the light returns, everything is exactly as it was. That is what's wrong — the thing you heard moving had time to get somewhere, and chose not to.

2

The informant doesn't show. The bench is empty, the signal unanswered, the chalk mark on the wall half-washed by rain.

TURN THE SCREW They show — an hour late, calm, word-perfect — and get one detail wrong that only someone else would get wrong.

3

The wrong bell. A single toll from a tower that has no reason to ring — not the hour, not an alarm, once, and done.

TURN THE SCREW It was a signal, and everyone on the street who understood it has already begun to walk, unhurried, in the same direction.

4

The dogs refuse. Every dog on the street — cart-dog, guard-dog, stray — will not cross a particular line, and will not look at what's beyond it either.

TURN THE SCREW One dog does cross. It comes back changed in some small way its owner keeps almost noticing.

5

The bridge is out. Flood, fire, or the toll-keeper's chain — the crossing you planned on is gone. There is a ferryman. There is always a ferryman.

TURN THE SCREW He knows your names. He asks no fee tonight — "it's been seen to" — and will not say by whom.

6

The patrol is early. Boots and lanterns a full hour before the watch should change, moving with somewhere to be.

TURN THE SCREW They are not looking for you. Whoever they are looking for is, at this moment, hiding in the same place you are.

7

The rain takes everything. The trail, the scent, the chalk marks, the ink on the letter in your pocket — the sky opens and the night's evidence runs into the gutters together.

TURN THE SCREW The letter's ink ran, but not evenly. The words that survive the water spell a shorter, worse message.

8

The safehouse light is on. The house that should be dark and waiting has a lamp in the upper window — your own signal, lit by somebody else.

TURN THE SCREW Inside, the kettle is warm and the table is set for exactly your number.

9

A witness. A child at a high window, chin on fists, watching everything with the terrible patience of the sleepless.

TURN THE SCREW The child waves — not at you. At whoever is behind you that you haven't seen yet.

10

The body is gone. Where you left it — dragged marks, no blood beyond what was already spilled, and the coins you closed its eyes with stacked neatly on the step.

TURN THE SCREW Whoever took it left the coins as payment. The going rate, in some ledgers, for a delivery.

11

The door is open for you. Barred, bolted, guarded — that was the report. It stands open on darkness, and the hinges have been oiled tonight.

TURN THE SCREW It closes behind the last of you. Not slammed. Latched, gently, the way a host closes a door.

12

Someone knows your name. Across the square, warm as an old friend, a voice calls the name you are traveling under — the false one — with real affection.

TURN THE SCREW They knew the man whose name you borrowed. They think you are him. He owed them something, and they are so glad you're finally back.

13

The landmark is missing. The map is good, the moon is up, the count of streets is right — and the tower, the tree, the fountain you were steering by simply is not there.

TURN THE SCREW A local, asked, has never heard of it — but their grandmother used to sing about it, and the song says what happened.

14

The sign is drawn wrong. Your contact's mark is on the doorpost as promised — reversed, or doubled, or drawn by a hand under duress. Close enough to invite you in. Wrong enough to be a warning, if you look twice.

TURN THE SCREW It isn't a warning. It's a test of whether you look twice, and the door is being watched to see what you do.

15

Midnight bells. Every tower at once, unscheduled, on and on — and shutters opening all down the street, lamps moving inside houses, the whole quarter waking to something it apparently expected.

TURN THE SCREW Doors begin to open. Every household stands on its step, silent, holding a light, facing the same way. Nobody looks at you. It would be so easy to just... stand on a step and hold a light.

16

The horses refuse. At the gate, at the ford, at the treeline — the animals plant their feet, roll their eyes white, and will go around but not through.

TURN THE SCREW Unloaded and led away, they calm instantly. It isn't the place. It's something you're carrying.

17

The fog displaces. Sound comes unstuck from distance — footsteps beside you from streets away, your own names whispered at your shoulder from a conversation happening somewhere else entirely.

TURN THE SCREW You hear the end of a conversation about tonight — plans, positions, a signal word — in voices you know. Your own among them, saying things you haven't said. Yet.

18

The coin is wrong. Payment made, payment counted — and under the lamp, the coin is freshly minted with a dead ruler's face, bright as this morning, from a mint that closed before your grandparents were born.

TURN THE SCREW A collector in the city pays handsomely for these, no questions. The questions come from the people who watch who sells to him.

19

Two invitations. The same meeting, the same hour — confirmed twice, by two different hands, at two different places.

TURN THE SCREW Both are genuine. Whoever you're meeting has split in two — a faction, a schism, a body-double, a haunting — and attendance is the ballot you didn't know you were casting.

20

Dawn comes early. You had two hours; the sky disagrees. Grey in the east, birds starting, the night's business half-done — either you miscounted, or the night was shortened from the far end.

TURN THE SCREW The bells confirm the impossible hour. Somewhere, someone paid a great deal for tonight to be short — and what they bought it for is already finished.