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I am north of where I was. Go north. That was the imperative. Always north. Although the why of it is no longer clear. Follow the needle. He leadeth me in the paths.

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The old prayers, unsaid for decades, come back unbidden. Ghosts. Empty conjurings. Dry on the tongue.

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In a rocky hollow you will find an old shieling. I'll lay me here a while. Safe in the middle of hills. Surely.

You didn't give her your name, did you? Here's all I have, I said, giving her the money. The sum total of a life. Are you come here to die? she said, like she meant it. I don't remember. Leave a list in this bag and hang it by the field-gate, once a week. You'll get you what you need. She seemed to understand it better than I did myself. Done this before? I asked. She didn't reply.

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Near darkness. A steep climb. A field-gate.
A rough track through the field, still climbing.
And then a low stone hut. Thickset walls.
Built, surely, to keep out something other than
weather. Goodness and mercy. You could bury
a body in there. Lengthways.

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Are you come here to die? She must have seen
the blood. I tried to walk straight but her eyes
said it. You look in bad shape, boy.

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And now I drift in and out. In and out. This cannot be good. I gave her all the money. The sum total. Who is that, there? My heart. Hello?

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There is nothing for it. I'll lay me here. Nothing to be done. How to fill the black hours? Voices. At the threshold of hearing. Flashlights? I cannot tell.

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Three cramped rooms and no running water.
A well in the yard. No toilet but a stone
outhouse. A hearth but no heat. Even if there
was wood to burn I will not risk a fire. I will
not give a sign to be found. I will be ready.

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You didn't give her your name, did you? Be still.
The pain is unbearable at times. To move is
agony.

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Each day the rain, ceaseless. The sound like
nothing I can tell.

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What made people climb up into these hills,
centuries ago? To a place where even water
does not stay, but runs, as fast as it can, to lower
ground? What had they done, that they would
hide up here? Is it safe?

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Bed down there. Out of sight. Prepare yourself.
They will come. Think on that.

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Some bearings. Whitewashed walls. Clean enough, but there is mould in the air. In the largest room a wooden table. A chair. A chest, empty, except for some blankets and a handful of candles. A washstand and basin. A large horseshoe nailed to one of the roof-beams. On the wall a pendulum clock, still ticking. A large map over the mantelpiece. Near the door a small cold-room. In the other room a narrow bed. A bed-stand. Another smaller horseshoe. Only one door to the front of the building. Windows the only other means of escape. When my strength returns I will move the bed into the corner of the main room. I will face the door even in sleep.

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Who is that? Who is there? I know there is
someone but I do not see you.

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I will not give a sign. Touch the horseshoes.
Cross yourself. Say His name if you think it will
help. He leadeth me in the paths. I will dwell in
the house—

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I remember almost nothing of the journey.
A flight in the dark and I was only half-
conscious. Hovering on a threshold. Sluggish
with analgesics. The pain receding to a dull ache.
Lulled by the motion of the car. Its low engine
murmur. The blur of passing headlights.
How did I drive the thing so bloody?

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I can still hear the strain of the engine climbing
those last miles. Can feel the sting of the cold,
damp air as I stowed the car in the wood. Out
of sight.

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Goodness and mercy. I try to remember more
but it escapes me. Perhaps I have a fever. Am I
where I should be? Go north. He leadeth me in
the paths. To the limits of the map. The nameless
country. The empty page. You didn't give her
your name, did you?

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Bread, butter and cheese. A jar of bitter damson jam and some slices of cured ham wrapped in waxed paper. In the little time that I have been here, these things have become the centre of my world. I arrange them on the shelves of the cold-room obsessively. It has the look of a shrine. Meagre offerings to a departed god.

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All impossibly tangled. I see everything but
what I want to see. Disconnected images. Havoc.
Disorder. Something has broken loose. Up there.
I shudder at the thought.

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The interior of the car. Moving at great speed.
In the windshield a bright, indistinct blur, lit by
headlights in the night's darkness. Taking on
form. You didn't, did you?

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A figure, arms outstretched, waving pathetically,
mouth opening and closing, undoubtedly
emitting a panicked cry, unheard, drowned
out by traffic. You didn't?

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And then gone. Swallowed by the distance.
Down the road's long, dark throat.

Each time, in the dead of night, I awaken. Dry mouth. Chest tight. Struggling for breath. The pain flaring. That contorted afterimage filling the room as my hands flail. Feeling for light.

But there are no lights here. Nothing except an intermittent, white glow at the periphery of my vision. Swirling patterns of blue and green. Pinpoints of red. It is as if my eyes are filling in for the darkness, which is not merely a lack of light, but its utter negation.

And so I sit the whole night through. Hunched in the corner. Back against the wall. The pain and the dark show.

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You look in bad shape, boy. Bed down there.
Rest a while. You'll get used to it. You could bury
a body in there. Whitewashed walls. The sum
total of a life.

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