

The Gift Horse  
By Aidan Michael Collins

Eckhart was about to unlock his flat door when there was a loud knock. He didn't answer. He looked around at the chocolate bar wrappers on the coffee table, and the beer bottles and pizza boxes in the bedroom. He heaved a sigh, closed the bedroom door, then opened the front door. He was wearing his usual garb - loafers, dungarees, and a yellow t-shirt with a triskelion on it. There was a man on the landing at the top of the stair who looked out of place. He was wearing a tweed suit jacket, a striped shirt, a fancy necktie, and shiny shoes with buckles. 'Are you Mr Eckhart Gumkirk?' asked the man. 'Yes, Gumkirk is my surname.' Eckhart thought the whole situation was peculiar. Why would someone who looked so rich come to a shabby flat like his? He didn't make much money at his job at Saughton Prison. Administrative clerks got a lot less than the guards or the Warden.

'My name is Angus Colman.' Eckhart's mouth fell open, and he stared wide-eyed at the man. He began to tremble. But he closed his mouth and tried to smile; he held out his hand, and said, 'Pleased to meet you. Is there something I can help you with? What are you doing here?' It had been 10 years ago. He had only been at his job for two weeks when he made the mistake that led to the freeing of a murderer. And the murderer's name was Angus Colman. He had kept that secret to himself for a whole decade. Was this stylishly-dressed man really that prisoner? How did he know where he lived? How did he know it was his error that released him? How did he know his name? What motivated him to find him now?

'I believe I owe you my life,' said Angus Colman. Eckhart's shoulders dropped as his tension suddenly waned. He wasn't there to hurt him, thank God. He seemed harmless. Perhaps things weren't so bad. 'What do you mean? I've never seen you before,' answered Eckhart. 'I came here because I know what you've been hiding for all these years. You're the one who got me out of prison. Illegally. Did you deliberately falsify the release order or do it inadvertently?' Eckhart felt stunned. He began to wring his hands and breathe quickly. He couldn't think straight. 'It was a mistake,' he blurted. He couldn't believe that he had just admitted what he had kept inside for all that time. Eckhart began to think about why Angus might be there. Was he there to blackmail him? Eckhart didn't have any money. Maybe he wanted him to do it again, on purpose this time.

'I came up here from Chelsea today to offer you £100,000 as an expression of my appreciation,' Angus announced. Eckhart leapt back, and let out a cheer. He could go work at the excavation site at Vindolanda; he could act on his interest in archeology. Perhaps he could eventually resign from his job at Saughton Prison and get a paying position in archeology. Then he snapped out of these reveries. What would accepting all this money really entail? What would happen to him if people at the prison found out? They'd think that he took dirty money. It would be careless to accept illicit money. Was it dirty money? He had to ask.

'How did you get this money? Is it legit?' 'Yes, it's legal. Don't worry about that. I went to London after I got out and turned my life around. I'm a fashion designer - men's clothes. I work with Chittleborough and Morgan.' Eckhart didn't quite believe that, but then again, he had noticed how stylishly he was dressed. Angus handed him one of his business cards, and Eckhart's uncertainty, like a scrap of paper caught in a current, eddied away. After all, he

wanted to believe him. He wanted a reason to accept the money. He thought that he still shouldn't be too quick to agree. There might be a slight chance that he was lying or another reason to be wary.

Eckhart was turning it over in his head one last time. It seemed too good to be true. Could it possibly go sideways? People might notice if he suddenly had lots of money, and things changed meteorically for him. They might start wondering what the source was. There might be an investigation. And then he'd have to testify in court and admit that he had allowed the murderer out of prison. Eckhart thought that if he accepted the money then things might switch completely and Angus would be free while he would be detained.

Eckhart cleared his throat. 'I must decline.' It took all of his effort to force those words out of his mouth. He slowly closed the door, staggered to the sofa, and sat down.