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(machine translated from German into French)

### **The post horn of love**

The elegant, old woman stood next to the large yellow Postbus and drove slowly, almost tenderly, over the printed post horn symbol with her bony finger. She wore a pink frilled blouse, a silver-grey woolly jacket, a dark skirt and an old-fashioned hat. I wondered briefly why she hadn't come across me on the bus before, because she seemed like one of the quirky governors of bygone times. This late afternoon, there were only three of us standing at the edge of a winding mountain road above a high rocky outcrop: the driver, the old lady and me. A small rockslide had occurred on the road in front of us and we had to wait for the local fire brigade to clear the obstacle. It was October, and still unusually warm for this time of year, so we got out to enjoy the last rays of sunshine of the day. A few late birds chirped their evening hymn in the dark larches around us, with a lazy mosquito buzzing by our ears every now and then. I looked at the old woman on the Postbus again and I blushed at the thought that she'd probably noticed my clumsy attempts at flirting with the attractive driver all along. I had known Marco since I was a child, because he had gone to school with my eldest brother, but I had only noticed him since I commuted home from university every Friday afternoon. With his dark curls, his broad shoulders, his infectious laugh and a voice that could make chocolate melt, he probably didn't just make my female heart beat faster. "Are you okay, ma'am?" I heard this warm, melodious voice asking, and I saw Marco walking up to the old lady from the corner of my eye. She shrugged slightly and briefly pulled her gnarled finger back from the printed post horn. Then she raised her head, looked long into the imposing mountain landscape and finally left her clear, blue gaze researching on me. "You must be around 20 years old, my child, right?" she immediately addressed me. I nodded reluctantly and forced myself to a small smile, but I was a bit annoyed secretly that my adolescence was so displayed in front of Marco. The old woman did not seem to notice, but thoughtfully continued: "I was a little younger than you, my dear. Yes, maybe a year or two younger, but at that time, we women were already working at 16 in the factory in the valley. It was a hard, monotonous life that you young people cannot even imagine living. I was young, full of dreams, full of desires, love, love, love and imagination, but the plight of the interwar years forced me to contribute to my family income. I guess I would have gone mad back then if it hadn't been for Jean-Paul." The old lady's gaze wandered over to Marco, she did a long, thorough examination and then nodded kindly a few times, as if to herself. "Yes, yes... He was like them, young man, just a little smaller and sturdier, but just as likeable. We met twice a day, in the morning on the way down, and in the evening on the way home. The three-tone post horn always heralded the most beautiful moments of the day. Jean-Paul was a good, prudent Postbus-to-driver, very friendly, popular with everyone, helpful and reliable. When there weren't many guests sitting on the bus, we sometimes spoke quietly to each other, but we also understood each other without words. We were soul mates, you know?" She paused briefly to breathe, but did not wait for our response. "We got closer, fell in love with each other and finally decided to get married secretly on my twentieth birthday and emigrate abroad. My parents obviously hadn't heard about our plans, as they would have been a scandal at the time. Jean-Paul was a Frenchman and a Catholic, my father had already planned for me a Protestant peasant son as his husband. Then the war broke out, and Jean-Paul was ushered in by his homeland; after his last trip, he kissed me at the mouth for the first time and swore to come back as soon as possible if I were just waiting for him. I would have promised him anything on that day, even the moon and the stars in the sky. But in the years after the war, Postbus drivers changed on this route every few months and Jean-Paul was not one of them. No one blew the post horn with the beautiful three-tone horn again, but it was only honked loudly. By the time I was in my mid-thirties, I finally had to decide whether I wanted to start another family. So I married Kurt, the Protestant peasant son, who, ironically, looked a little bit like Jean-Paul, but never quite understood me. We had four children and moved into the valley. I learned to drive a car, and so I took the Postbus

from there only once a year, one year after Jean-Paul's farewell." She remained silent. My eyes filled with tears of pity as I listened, and I gratefully reached for the cranky handkerchief that Marco held in for me. None of us spoke for a few minutes. "Have you... ever seen Jean-Paul again?" Marco finally asked. The old lady smiled gently. "Yes, young man, I have. I once saw him again on the same Postbus route, shortly after my seventieth birthday. I remember having a particularly warm feeling in my heart that day, and thinking to myself that the post horn of the approaching yellow bus was sounding incredibly pure. When I got started, I recognized Jean-Paul right away. He had grown old like me, but he still held his chin proudly stretched out and had his back straightened. I sat down at him without saying anything, he looked at me briefly, smiled contentedly and immediately started to tell the story. He was imprisoned in Russia for a time and, for years after the war, recovered from the tuberculosis that was trapped there in a remote sanatorium. He had entered into a short relationship with a nurse who left him when he did not want to marry her. I showed him a photo of my family and told him about my children. We talked about our journeys as if they had nothing to do with us, as if they were a film we watched in the distance, shaking our head. Our break-up suddenly seemed like an unreal dream. It seemed like someone had turned back time and we had remained together all these years. Our hands touched as naturally in the three-tone sound of the post horn." She sighed deeply, then continued quietly: "When we got out, we hugged each other long and Jean-Paul blew a tender kiss on my cheek. He had lost none of his charm, my knees were still soft on looking at me. We weren't talking about reunion because my husband was very sick at the time and Jean-Paul understood that I couldn't leave him. Privately, however, I hoped to find him again after Kurt's death to spend my final years with him. But this should not happen. As my husband lay dying, I heard several times the echo of the post horn like a sad warning call from the mountains above us and a dark foreboding appealed to me. Two weeks later, I became a double widow. Jean-Paul was also terminally ill and succumbed to his suffering after a brief battle. It was out of respect for my marriage that he hadn't told me about his condition when we last met. I..." She couldn't keep coming because Marco suddenly had his hand on his forehead. "The post horn, yeah definitely!" he exclaimed, disappearing in large steps on the bus. After digging around under the seat in his driver's cabin for a while, he pulled out a flat, hard parcel that had seen better days. He quickly jumped back into the open and, with a small bow, handed the old woman the crushed cardboard box. "This may belong to you, Madam An old passenger handed them to my uncle many years ago, who used to drive on this line in front of me. He should give it only to the woman for whom the post horn has a very special significance. I guess that's true for you, right?" While he was speaking, the old lady had opened the box and now, gently, almost solemnly, pulled out an old post horn that seemed very functional. She looked at it almost cautiously from all sides for a while, before pressing it against her chest with a deep sigh and smiling contentedly. It was obvious that she recognized it. It was their post horn of love that Jean-Paul used to announce the arrival of the yellow bus on every journey. I could sense that Marco was only too keen to try the old horn, and I too was thirsty to hear the unmistakable "du-da-do" about that particular instrument, but we both didn't dare to ask the old woman to. Instead, Marco's radio began to vibrate, and he was notified that we could continue. Silently, lost in thought, I travelled on the yellow bus and, as usual, sat down on the front seat. The old lady, on the other hand, used the back door, put her post horn on the back seat of the Postbus and closed her eyes with satisfaction. I assumed she needed some rest after the emotions of the day and didn't want to disturb her sweet memories. So I looked forward, and never once looked back over her again before I went all the way to the village. But when we reached the terminus of the route, I wanted to say goodbye to it briefly. But as I turned my head aside, the words literally stuck in my throat and my eyes widened in terror. "Marco", I blew in an almost tone-free voice, and heard him joking beside me at the same moment. We had travelled unstopped to the terminus to make up some of the time lost in the rockslide. Marco had slowed down and slowed down at the remaining stops on the route, but didn't stop if nobody was waiting for the Postbus. Despite this, the bus was now empty except for us, and the doors were still locked. But the old post horn lay abandoned on the seat where the old lady had once taken a seat. Marco picked it up with trembling hands, gently stroked the gleaming metal and looked deeply in my eyes.

Then he took a deep breath and blew inside. A melodious du-da-do wrapped warmly around our hearts, the flame of love lit up in our eyes and our lips were in a first tender kiss.

It was only a week later that I read in the local newspaper the obituary of a certain Anne-Marie Graber, who had died unexpectedly in her ninety-fourth year on the very morning of the day on which the post horn incident took place. From the little black and white picture attached to her, the good-natured face smiled at the very woman who travelled with us that afternoon on the bus, all eight hours after her sudden passing. Marco and I probably never know why she honoured us with her presence.

But the old post horn still hangs in our shared flat at a place of honour above the door and reminds us every day of the great fortune we had when we found our soul mate in the post horn three-tone horn.